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A MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONER'S PRIMER--CRITICAL INTERVENTION IN SCHOOL DESEGREGATION.

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A MENTAL HEALTH WORKER CAN FUNCTION AS A CONSULTANT WHO HELPS TO IDENTIFY THE FACTORS WHICH INTERFERE WITH SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL INTEGRATION. AT THE PRESENT TIME OPEN ENROLLMENT METHODS FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION HAVE BEEN HAMPERED BY POOR MANAGEMENT DURING THE THREE "CRITICAL"PHASES OF A MOVEMENT TOWARD INTEGRATION. THE PHASES INVOLVE A PLANNING AND PREPARATION PERIOD, THE ACTUAL INITIATION OF DESEGREGATION PROGRAMS, AND THE WORKING-THROUGH PROCESS TO ACHIEVE THE ATTITUDINAL CHANGES NECESSARY FOR TRUE INTEGRATION. THE EARLY, PLANNING, PHASE REQUIRES THE AVAILABILITY OF IMPORTANT DIAGNOSTIC AND PROGNOSTIC FACTS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ADMINISTRATION AND THE STAFF, THE STUDENTS, AND THE COMMUNITY IN THE RECEIVING SCHOOL. IN GENERAL, THE PRINCIPAL IS THE CORNERSTONE OF THE SUCCESS OF FAILURE OF THE PLANS. THE PREPARATION PERIOD MUST INCLUDE THE INVOLVEMENT OF AND PARTICIPATION BY PARENTS IN BOTH SENDING AND RECEIVING SCHOOLS. WHAT IS MORE, CAREFUL EVALUATIONS OF THE INITIAL EVENTS OF THE DESEGREGATION PROCESS ARE NEEDED TO FORESTALL THE ENTRENCHMENT OF THE EFFECTS OF DESTRUCTIVE EXPERIENCES. ALSO "MASSIVE EDUCATIONAL MANEUVERS" TO REMEDIATE THE ACADEMIC DEFICIENCIES OF THE INCOMING GROUP MUST BE PART OF THE INITIAL PHASE. TUTORIAL PROGRAMS WITH VOLUNTEER COLLEGE STUDENTS AND NEIGHBORHOOD MOTHERS ARE HELPFUL TECHNIQUES FOR BOTH REMEDIATION AND ATTITUDE CHANGES. SOME ILLUSTRATIVE EXPERIENCES OF RECEIVING SCHOOLS IN NEW YORK CITY ARE INCLUDED. (NH)

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A MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONER'S PRIMER: CRITICAL INTERVENTION IN SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

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Social change is usually a gradual process that is best defined retrospectively. At certain moments in history abrupt changes may arise coincident with some catastrophic event such as a major war, or as a result of legislation, such as the recent desegregation moves. When the social action that is demanded is in conflict with deep-rooted feelings, tensions are created; when the tensions become sufficiently intense, social symptoms may arise, ranging from the rioting and violence which have occurred in many parts of the country, to more subtle signs of conflict. Wherever social process is productive of conflict and anxiety in individuals and in groups, the mental health worker has a contribution to make.

Specifically we shall be dealing with the consultant's role in school desegregation, with examples drawn from New York City where the open-enrollment program provides for the bussing of children from ghetto areas into schools in predominantly white neighborhoods. The focus will be on identification of interference with the growth and healthy attitude change that a well-functioning, integrated school can provide. This is not always an easy task. So intense is the spotlight on desegregation that many psychosocial ills are automatically attributed to some racial issue. On the other hand, pathology in an individual can be exacerbated by the racial conflicts so that it becomes manifest in symptoms. We explore whether the child or teacher or group will respond to a diminution of tensions within the field, or, at the other extreme, is the child's removal from school necessary? or, must some form of psychotherapy be instituted? Although the consultant may also function in the traditional role of therapist for the latter cases, this area will not be discussed here.

A request for consultation is manifestly an expression of concern about a situation or about a child. Since it is made <u>by</u> a referring teacher (who has her own interests and needs) <u>to</u> a professional worker (whose personality has been revealed to the staff or distorted by the local myths about the profession),

it requires familiarity with the particular school community to appreciate all the subtleties of communication.

At times we may even be unclear about the locus of a problem since behavior may mask a latent conflict even several steps removed from the apparent participants. In a rather dramatic fashion Stanton and Schwartz documented this phenomenon occurring among psychiatric patients in their book The Mental Hospital. "The most striking finding was that pathologically excited patients were quite regularly the subject of secret, affectively important staff disagreement; and equally regularly, their excitement terminated, usually abruptly, when the staff members were brought to discuss seriously their points of disagreement with each other..." 1/

This also occurs within the schools. A junior high school shop class became unmanageable and demolished much of the classroom equipment. By the next morning the teachers had planned a union meeting to protest to the administration and demand strong disciplinary action, including suspension of several of the children.

I was brought in when it was suggested that several children might require medical suspense or at least be referred as patients. By chance I had been observing this particular class for several months during their social studies class, where the teacher was an easy-going, competent man who was able to tolerate a good deal of erratic behavior and maintain an attitude calmly conducive to active class participation and learning. This was in spite of two obviously schizophrenic children, whose behavior was more than matched by the chronic 'trouble-makers.' After the riot even this strong teacher felt he had been duped by the children. He conducted a classroom third degree, and

1/ Stanton, A.H., and Schwartz, M.S. (1954), The Mental Hospital. New York. Basic Books, Inc., p. 345.

became even angrier as he was unable to obtain any consensus as to how the fracus had begun.

The events were hard to explore since each informant used the event either to support his own views or to promote some private course of action. They were inflamed by a malcontented teacher who was known to have called the newspapers once to protest against student 'violence.' The fact was that the shop teacher was an extremely anxious young man of limited teaching experience. He had been criticized frequently by his supervisor for not keeping the class under better control. The principal of the school was equally fearful about his position; he dreaded any critical publicity, and wanted only to be left undisturbed by any daily events, offering little support to his staff. That particular morning, while awaiting an important visit from one of his superiors, making one of his rare trips out of his office, he went and demanded that the teacher maintain perfect discipline all day. As you might imagine, this did not enhance the teacher's tranquillity. He was somehow able to avoid serious mishap until his keys disappeared and he became totally preoccupied with finding them. The 'riot' broke out fifteen minutes later. Even at this point some effective action might have been taken; instead, the teachers who came to his aid were either furious with the children, or hoped to make an issue of it to demand more rigid disciplinary supports from the principal. My only intervention was to confirm the social studies teacher's original perceptions of his own experience with the children. He then investigated the situation, and, as an officer of the union, he presented the facts to the special meeting in such a way as to lead his colleagues to a supportive compromise.

Once a problem and the focal participants have been identified, and before determining the appropriate intervention, it is necessary to understand the specific needs of the desegregation phase in which the school is.

The concept of 'critical' phases was first postulated in the field of embryology. It relates to a genetically determined moment in which specific cellular development and organization must occur, provided that the appropriate environmental ingredients are available. Should something interfere with the process at that given moment, a specific deformity will result. Critical phases in human psychological development are central to almost all psychoanalytic theories, referring to various developmental milestones that have to be passed successfully before being able to enter into the next phase. Once the appropriate time has passed, major modifications are needed to achieve the missing step---if possible at all. For example, people born with congenital cataracts, but operated on too late, will find it impossible to organize the newly acquired visual stimuli, and plead to be taken back to their 'blind' state. During the period in childhood of highest potential for acquisition of language, under ideal circumstances, several languages can be learned simultaneously. If none has been learned at the appropriate time, not only will he find it much more difficult to acquire later, but he will also be hampered in his next task, which is to adapt to and communicate with the new significant people when he enters school.

Social change and the concomitant attitudinal changes follow a similar course. In the desegregation process certain steps can be distinguished, which must be accomplished in due order or relatively permanent disorders, even more resistant to change, will result.

For example, in one school where things had progressed to the point that some children were being invited to lunch occasionally by some neighborhood parents, the Negro group was nevertheless largely confined to the school boundaries. The successful, confident principal showed a rare moment of defensiveness. He said, "My job is to integrate the school, not the neighborhood,"

as he described how he had to impose this major restriction on the insistence of local shopkeepers who complained bitterly about the children's destructiveness in their stores and reported how they were being robbed. They wanted to rid the neighborhood of the vandals, and the principal's only course was to lock in his charges.

At this phase in the desegregation program the neighborhood should have been using their recent experiences to correct irrational attitudes; instead, it had served to fortify the original fears so that herculean efforts were then needed to overcome the mutual distrust. Let us reconstruct the events. Insufficient preparatory work within the community prior to the enrollment of the first Negro child, and inadequate administrative selection of students for the program had already taken their toll. Provisions should then have been made for the gradual introduction of the children into the outside community. Instead, they were released for the first time after a crowded, tension-mounting lunch hour. They had been yelled at by a bunch of teachers who were resentful to begin with about assignment to lunchroom duty. They had not had it before because the local children ate lunch at home. The teachers' angry expectations of a difficult task, with the glaring eyes and premature shoves at the slowpokes, were only the beginning of a series of self-fulfilling assumptions. In the light of the mounting tension, we have to consider the mutual effects of the suddenly released children, stepping for the first time into an alien store in an alien neighborhood, being welcomed by the anxious shopkeeper's suspicious, covert surveillance. Will not the outcome confirm each participants worst expectations?

In general, each of the phases has its own task. The first phase of desegregation involves planning and preparation. The next phase begins with the actual initiation of the desegregation program; it is characterized by major transitions and active attempts at reestablishing some kind of equilibrium on

a new level. After this has been achieved, the long, arduous third step of working through the levels of attitudinal change results in a final stage of actual integration, in which the goal of stability on the most opportune level has been reached.

During each of these phases there are appropriate actions to be taken in most areas: administrative decisions, teacher preparation, actual work with children, active involvement of parents, community, and ancillary school personnel, such as aides, janitorial staff and even the bus drivers.

Expert administrative decisions are essential to get such a program started. For example, unfortunate misapplication of the open-enrollment program will later plague many otherwise well-planned ventures; some distraught administrators seize upon it to free their school of difficult problem children by suggestions to the parents that major trouble would be avoided by transfer to an open-enrollment school. Even anticipating and providing for children with educational and social handicaps, the new schools were often sabotaged by the high percentage of serious socio- and psycho-pathology, which added to their other problems and later served to confirm many of the indigenous parents' worst fears.

Participation in parent groups and social teas should begin during the planning stage and should continue as an active program of collaboration, not only preparing the groundwork for mutual understanding, but also providing a viable apparatus to deal with future problems. Although there are certainly many poorly motivated children and parents, this is far from universal; thus many intelligent leaders can be found in the donor groups. Success or failure of community planning is not always just a matter of motivation. After taking into account the transportation problems and natural anxiety of new parents to enter the alien neighborhood, one team guaranteed success by sending a worker

into the ghetto area to set up a parent group as the initial step.

During this early planning phase many important diagnostic and prognostic facts will become evident by observing the nature of the relationship of the school authority structure to the teaching staff, students and the community. If too rigid and authoritarian, it is more likely that community and personnel problems will erupt; alternately, a very weak administration that is either unwilling to take leadership or unable to cope with the problems, will reveal itself usually in the form of anxiety, in every corner of the school.

It cannot be stated too often that the principal is not only the cornerstone to success of his school's desegregation program, but also may be the deciding factor in the acceptance and viability of the consultant's functioning in the school, so that working actively with him is urgent during all phases.

When the first child appears many errors in planning will become evident and can be corrected. Because of the scheduled arrival time of the bus, one school found it easier to check in the children after the neighborhood children were seated and out of the way. What would have been more natural, then, than to place them together closer to the wardrobes to keep confusion at a minimum? The obvious result was a segregated classroom.

Once such administrative plans become standard operating procedure they can become more difficult to spot. A school psychologist was referred several children with severe behavior problems for diagnosis. She noted that these were all Negro children who were having their worst difficulties during the lunch hour when each one began acting-out. Investigation revealed that crowded conditions required a double shift for the 'hot lunch' program in the school cafeteria. Meanwhile neighborhood children brought their sandwiches. They ate in the front of the auditorium while the second hot lunch group, awaiting their turn in the cafeteria, sat looking on hungrily from the rear. All the referrals came from this group.

Meanwhile the teachers were complaining about lunchroom duty. Finally the principal agreed to hold a meeting with the teachers to discuss the situation, the first time they had been consulted about any administrative matters. This was a major accomplishment for the worker, and had far-reaching effects on the staff morale. The principal laid the blame for the children's poor discipline on the lack of structure in the schools from which they had come. When the psychologist described the hungry children watching from the back of the auditorium, suggestions began flying. A simple solution evolved: all the younger children were given an earlier lunch hour while the older groups, who could wait a little longer, ate later.

While such matters are being straightened out, one task takes absolute precedence: if the integration is not merely to confirm fixed beliefs, the entire school must work towards massive educational maneuvers directed to correcting discrepancies in reading, academic achievement, etc. But, a special program may fail through lack of parental support or because of the group attitudes toward the educational process, or the lack of remedial materials or techniques, all of which require appropriate handling. Similarly, a logistical matter, such as inadequate late bus facilities, could equally sabotage an after-school tutorial program.

A not uncommon technique toward this end has been the formation of tutorial programs involving various volunteer groups such as a club of potential teachers in a junior high school, or college student volunteers, etc. An interesting variation was a group of neighborhood mothers recruited from parents associaton, churches and community organizations. In their preparatory sessions the worker not only trained them to tutor reading, but also involved them in discussions around the social problems and their expectations. As they began work they were surprised to find that the children responded warmly to the

individual attention and actively sought it out; while there were different attitudes toward learning, the emotional response was surprisingly similar to their own children. One white mother who called for her charge regularly in his third grade classroom was astonished, but rather proud, when she overheard his classmates ask him whether this was his mother. The group fulfilled its dual goals; it not only helped the educational deficiencies, but also modified the community resistance. While their experiences straight from the firing line are used to urge their friends and neighbors to a more accepting and understanding approach, they, themselves, may not have progressed beyond the 'mascot phase;' this bespeaks a protective aspect towards their one pupil, unrealistically endowing him with idealized attributes as someone special while they may remain unchanged toward the rest of the group.

The Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry's report[2/] describes this as one of several types of partial attitude change. Another preliminary change is the 'denial of differences' which, being achieved, may have a rather anomalous effect. By insisting that these children are the same as the local children, the staff may lose sight of the special needs of the deprived group and thus subvert the necessary educational intervention. Similarly, there are very real differences in socio-economic status which carry with it different value systems. Rather than attempt to deny their existence the children must be helped to understand and accept them.

An effective principal had gone to ingenious lengths in setting up a Wall of Fame in the main corridor, with sufficient categories to provide awards and incentive for all children in the school. Yet his denial of prejudice posed soul-searching difficulties for himself whenever he had to recognize the differences in order to work out a new program or arrange class groupings.

2/ Psychiatric Aspects of School Desegregation. Report No. 37. Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, New York, pp. 35-7, May, 1957.

Let me now progress to some examples derived from the 'working through' phase. A crisis arose in the third grade. Three Negro girls, who were poor students and very hostile, conducted a merciless campaign of harrassment against three white girls, passive, studious, and felt to be 'goody-goody,' yet subtly provocative in excluding the Negroes and showing them up. The teacher was under a terrible strain and several times a day became overwhelmed, burst into tears, and pleaded with the girls to "look what they were doing to her." The psychologist, being resident in the school, and knowing well the teacher's fragility, rightfully decided that this was not a matter to handle merely by consultation; she felt the need to intervene directly to relieve the stress, since the teacher would be unable to modify the situation even with strong support.

The decision, then, was to form a group consisting of the three Negro and three white girls. The mixed results of this venture point to the importance of proper evaluation of the critical needs with plans that are tailored to those needs. When the group worked out some of their superficial feelings there was a rapid amelioration of the classroom situation. This 'cooperation' was carried even further in that the Negro girls, who had taken no academic interest, initiated the writing and production of several plays which the six performed before other classes. Teachers tolerated the mediocre quality, but the younger children enjoyed the performances. Thus the group accomplished its ends in several ways: the Negro girls derived some sense of achievement in an area that had been of no interest to them before, and the school accepted the six of them as a group with no separate color designations; there was also some improvement in the ability of the two factions to communicate.

When it fulfilled the original intent of improving the classroom situation, this might have been the point for the group to terminate. However, they continued, with growing resistance to the group on the part of the mothers of

the three white girls. At the end of the term they refused to allow their daughters' participation in any activity that would result in their missing class time. Furthermore, the worker, herself, was quite uneasy about the quality of the 'friendships' that had sprung up. She felt that this continued to be the result of the intimidation by the aggressive girls which had just been pushed below the surface. It thus left the Negro girls with another sense of failure in their ill-conceived attempt at friendship with the specific sub-group with whom they had the least possibility of success.

Incidentally, with the self-exclusion of the three girls, the Negro girls elected to bring in three friends as new members, and the group thus reformed itself. This all-Negro group remained in effective operation for several years, even to the extent that the worker almost forgot that there had ever been a desegregated period, since this seemed to fulfill their needs so well.

The pressure to desegregate can result in premature heterogeneous groupings, whereas a separate Negro group might sometimes be necessary as a means of developing respect for oneself before the other can be approached effectively. These Negro girls were able to work out something quite basic with the worker. As she struggled to understand their communication, which required incessant requests for clarification, her respect for them grew, as did their reflected self-respect. They were thus more able to deal less defensively with the white children.

Another case in point is a larger group formed of all Negro children from several classes in another grade school. It emerged out of the recognition by the guidance counsellor of the mutual needs of the children, who entered school each morning excited by the undisciplined trip and the complaining bus driver. While initially the focus was in terms of the bus problem, she also

took very seriously the children's views and reactions to school ills wherever they appeared. Eventually they forced her to deal with their feelings about themselves. It began first by fighting one another, then scapegoating mercilessly a disturbed, slum-dwelling white girl whom they accused of being dirty and smelly, both qualities that the culture made them feel toward themselves. After each of these sessions they managed to get themselves punished by various members of the staff, from the lunchroom teachers to the school aides. It was only when the worker understood the unspoken derivatives of their behavior, and felt comfortable enough to talk to them about these factors, that the situation was relieved. At this point the group is ready to be split up by classes and introduce white children to explore the next order of problems dealing with deeper levels of relations between the races.

These examples serve to illustrate how a specific problem called out a specific solution geared not only to that problem, but also relates to the specific phase of social change. Wherever the referral arises, be it around an individual child or an unmanageable situation, intervention is planned to produce change and enable growth. One can begin with the school bus, a classroom clique, an individual child or a more generalized sense of the school atmosphere or its administrative structure, but priority of intervention directed to administration, community, child, teacher, bus driver or school aide, must be specifically chosen for timing and direction. For each move that we make we must deal actively with the personality factors involved. Each contact is an opportunity to promote healthy exploration of interpersonal relations and attitudes.

We see our task as a continued study of attitude change and growth, fitting our understanding to the specific social field that is each individual school and its personnel, and adapting ourselves to exploring the most effective techniques of intervention wherever needed.

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